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SUBJECT: EU "GYMNICH" MEETING: FUTURE OF W. BALKANS IS IN
THE EU BUT ROAD WILL BE LONG

Classified By: Political Officer Vincent Carver for reason 1.5 (b/d).

THIS IS A JOINT USEU - EMBASSY VIENNA MESSAGE.

SUMMARY

1. (C) EU foreign ministers, in their informal "Gymnich" formation, met with their Balkan and Turkish counterparts in Salzburg March 11, issuing a joint press statement that reaffirmed the European perspective for the region but noted that the EU's absorption capacity has to be taken into account when EU leaders debate enlargement strategy at the June European Council. Ministers expressed full support for Ahtisaari's efforts to find a negotiated solution on Kosovo's final status and noted that full cooperation with ICTY remains a condition for membership. They supported a free trade area in the region building on the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). According to contacts, the French were particularly difficult in insisting on reference to the EU's absorption capacity. Other issues reviewed at the Gymnich reported septels. END SUMMARY

EU, BALKAN AND TURKISH FMs ISSUE JOINT STATEMENT

2. (U) EU foreign ministers met with their counterparts from the Western Balkans, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey March 11 during the EU informal ministerial ("Gymnich") in Salzburg. All ministers agreed to a joint press statement (faxed to OPS Center March 11 and e-mailed to EUR/ERA March 13) that reaffirmed full support for the EU's Thessaloniki agenda (which, in 2003, stressed the European perspective for the region). The statement also expressed support for the EU's Stabilization and Association Process for Balkan integration, and confirmed that the future of the Western Balkans lies in the EU. The statement added that a debate on enlargement strategy is due in 2006 and noted that the EU's absorption capacity has to be taken into account.

FULL COOPERATION WITH ICTY REMAINS A CONDITION

3. (U) Ministers agreed that each country's progress toward EU membership continues to depend on individual merits in meeting Copenhagen criteria and Stabilization and Association requirements, including full cooperation with ICTY. They also noted that Western Balkan countries had made considerable progress and must now increasingly focus on adopting and implementing European standards. Participants agreed on the importance of good neighborly relations and on the need for finding mutually acceptable solutions to outstanding issues with neighboring countries.

FULL SUPPORT FOR AHTISAARI

4. (U) Ministers agreed that every effort should be made for a negotiated settlement on Kosovo, mutually acceptable to the parties, and expressed full support for Ahtisaari (who had briefed the ministers the morning of March 11).

WELCOME COMMISSION'S MODEST PROPOSALS

5. (U) Participants also welcomed the Commission's communication, "The Western Balkans on the road to the EU," and expressed their intention to implement its recommendations (visa facilitation, increased scholarships, increased trade preferences for the region).

SUPPORT FOR REGIONAL FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

6. (U) Ministers also encouraged "regional cooperation, including a free trade area building on the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)." Enlargement Commissioner Rehn said a regional Free Trade Agreement would boost trade and investment in the region. He noted that Romania, as CEFTA's chair, had invited interested parties to Bucharest on April 6 to discuss CEFTA's future.

THEMES ECHOED BY PLASSNIK, SOLANA, AND REHN

17. (U) In a joint press conference at the end of the Gymnich, Austrian FM Plassnik emphasized that, in reaffirming the region's European perspective, the "goal is membership and full integration of the region. There is no change to the ultimate objective." That said, Plassnik added that problems remain and must be addressed methodically. The Gymnich discussions on the Western Balkans included an "open and frank debate," that was not free of "criticism and some frustration." The countries of the region must progressively assume more responsibility for resolving their problems. The road to membership will be "long and demanding," and only with an "open and frank dialogue" will the EU and the region achieve success. Plassnik noted that both the EU and potential member states need to "do their homework," including on better explaining enlargement to European publics.

18. (U) EU High Rep Solana and Enlargement Commissioner Rehn offered more positive spins. Solana focused on the tremendous progress in the region in the three years since the Thessaloniki Summit, with Croatia and Macedonia now candidate countries. He said there is an increasing sense of a regional approach to issues. Solana also voiced full support for Ahtisaari's efforts. Rehn observed that prospect of EU membership was the major catalyst for reform, improved rule of law, and a better economic climate in the region. Rehn underscored that the EU has a big stake in Kosovo's future, "as it won't be the fifty-first state of the U.S. but will be part of the EU like the rest of the Balkans." He stressed that the new Kosovar government should focus on implementing standards immediately, concluding that political stability in Kosovo is needed for a sustainable settlement.

BUT FRENCH AND OTHERS PRESS ABSORPTION CAPACITY
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19. (U) French FM Douste-Blazy, in a separate press conference March 11, voiced support for Ahtisaari's efforts and stressed that negotiations must cover concrete measures on decentralization and protection of Serbian religious sites and cultural patrimony. He noted that the EU is preparing assistance for the police and the rule of law in Kosovo. Douste-Blazy underscored that cooperation with ICTY from Serbia and others was fundamental: "there is no question ... there is no European perspective" without full cooperation. While noting that EU FMs had underscored the European perspective for the region, he also stressed that enlargement must be discussed, including at the European Council in June, in the context of Europe's absorption capacity. He reasoned that this is important in obtaining the support of EU citizens for enlargement, saying that one cannot "rush headlong into enlargement without taking into account the views of our people."

10. (C) An advisor to Rehn told us that the French, Belgians, Dutch and Austrians pushed to refer specifically to the EU's "absorption capacity" in the joint press statement. An Austrian contact noted the priority Vienna places on the Western Balkans and said that Vienna had not called for a reference to absorption capacity. Given other member states' lobbying, however, as well as Austria's call last year for a reference to absorption capacity regarding Turkey, the Austrians agreed, our contact explained. Some of the Balkan ministers reportedly attempted to rebuff this inclusion, but were pacified with the specific EU confirmation "that the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union." Our contact added that the French also insisted on further review of possible visa facilitation for select groups of travelers from the Western Balkans as well as an increase in the Schengen visa fee. According to our contact, several Balkan delegations pointed out that this could mean that their citizens would pay more than Russians or Ukrainians for EU visas. One senior Austrian diplomat quipped to us that it appeared that the U.S. and Germany appeared more interested in getting Serbia into the EU than did the French.

11. (C) A Council Secretariat official working on enlargement characterized the French position to us as pre-electoral posturing, adding that he expected Paris to continue to take tougher stands on enlargement until at least after the 2007 French national elections. That said, he predicted that France would not cause difficulties for Romania and Bulgaria if the Commission recommends in May that they join the EU in 2007. Given the overall climate on enlargement, however, accession negotiations will become increasingly painstaking, our contact noted, with the EU wanting to demonstrate that no country should take future membership for granted. Croatian expectations that it might enter in 2009, he added, may be overly optimistic, particularly given the poor prospects of the constitutional treaty.

COMMENT
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12. (C) The EU's "absorption capacity" is not new -- in fact, it is part of the Copenhagen criteria for enlargement adopted by the EU in 1993. What is relatively new is the increased emphasis member states are placing on it when discussing candidates for accession. The Austrians and the French, with reported support from others, pushed for such language in the run-up to the October 3, 2005 decision to begin formal accession negotiations with Turkey. As part of the Copenhagen criteria, it can be interpreted in many different ways, which will allow any member state to question whether the EU would benefit from bringing in a potential member. The Salzburg Gymnich demonstrated that officials -- and not only in France -- are paying greater heed (or, at a minimum, are trying to portray themselves as doing so) to the need to view enlargement with a more critical pair of eyes. The EU also needs to do a much better and pro-active job at "educating" European publics about the successes of enlargement, particularly regarding the 2004 wave. Until that happens, we can expect further references to the EU's absorption capacity. The Gymnich noted that the EU's door is wide open to the Western Balkans and that member states want the Western Balkan countries to pass through the door. The threshold, however, likely will be higher as long as enlargement becomes increasingly a domestic electoral issue in member states.

GRAY

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